

CHANGES PROPOSED TO PROTECT WALLEYE

We in Michigan fully realize the value of the Great Lakes as a natural resource and are dedicated to protecting those great waters along with the other seven states, Canadian province and several tribes who share management jurisdictions. The fisheries associated with these lakes are a wonderful resource for both commercial and recreational activities, and the maintenance to a viable fishery population is imperative. To facilitate coordinated management of the fisheries, the governments of the US and Canada in 1955, negotiated and ratified the creation of the Great Lakes' Fishery Commission (GLFC). Under this commission, individual committees were formed for each of the Great Lakes. The Lake Erie Committee (LEC) is composed of fishery agency representation from Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York and Ontario.

Of great concern to the GLFC and the individual committees is the fact that since the late 1800's there has been a progressive depletion in the fish stocks in the Great Lakes due to invasive species, habitat loss and over harvesting. Stability in the Lake Erie walleye stock is lacking, and last year's take was the worst class of walleye in the past 28 years, and in spite of better assessment and monitoring and a more aggressive effort to control over harvests, walleye stocks continue to spiral downward. Current projections anticipate that the number of age-2 walleye and older will drop to approximately 17 million in Lake Erie in 2004. This is below the 19 million baseline level that the LEC has established as the minimum level that must be maintained.

For that reason, the Walleye Task Group (WTG) of the LEC recommended a 40-60% reduction in the allowable catch for walleye in 2004. This reduction represents a drop from 3.4 million fish harvested in 2003 by both commercial and recreational fishermen to between 1.4 and 2.0 million fish for 2004. Once the LEC agreed to this recommendation last March, each LEC jurisdiction was charged with developing a reduction plan to achieve these reductions in their waters.

Biologists from Michigan's Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) worked to develop a plan and looked specifically at three regulatory options: changes in size limits, bag limits and fishing seasons. Currently Michigan's regulations for Lake Erie walleye are a 13-inch minimum size, a 5-fish daily bag limit, and there is no closed season.

In considering size limits, it became clear that to meet the reduction level through this option alone, Michigan would need to increase size limits from 13 inches to 17 inches to achieve an estimated 47% reduction. A change to a 15-inch minimum would achieve an estimated 20% reduction.

If the daily bag limit were changed, daily take would need to be limited to only one or two fish to achieve the desired reduction. In considering a closed harvest season as an option, biologists determined that an estimate 51% reduction could be achieved if walleye harvest were prohibited in Michigan waters from April 1 to June 30, or a 49% reduction could be achieved with a closed season from July 1 to October 31.

In considering all options, the Lake Erie/Lake St. Clair Fisheries Advisory Committee determined no single option by itself was realistic or justifiable. Instead, the members supported an option that made changes to all three areas: size limits, bag limits and fishing season because the overall impact on the fishing public would be far less dramatic with a combination approach. Their recommendation was as follows: a 15-inch minimum size limit, a 5-fish daily bag limit and a closed harvest season from April 1 to May 31. This combination is expected to reduce the walleye harvest in Michigan waters by about 40%.

Michigan's approach is similar to that being proposed by scientists and managers in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York. These states are committed to the wise conservation, protection and management of the Great Lakes and their fisheries to ensure continued enjoyment of these wonderful natural resources for both current and future generations. As I write this article, Ontario has not yet agreed to similar protections. Hopefully, they will follow the lead of the others as it will take all working together to achieve the best results.

By Senator Bev Hammerstrom
17th District